

AUS9-2000-0445-US1

Patent Application

## Application for United States Patent

of

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for

5 Method and System for E-mail Sender Chain History

## CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

(CLAIMING BENEFIT UNDER 35 U.S.C. 120)

Not applicable.

## FEDERALLY SPONSORED RESEARCH

10 AND DEVELOPMENT STATEMENT

This invention was not developed in conjunction with any Federally sponsored contract.

## MICROFICHE APPENDIX

Not applicable.

15 INCORPORATION BY REFERENCE

Not applicable.

## BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

This invention pertains to the arts of electronic message and e-mail transmission and reception, and especially to the arts of automatic address generation for e-mail composers and readers for replying to e-mail messages which have been chain-forwarded.

Description of the Related Art

Electronic mail and electronic messaging have become key and integral to everyday life, both in personal lives and business lives, for millions of users worldwide. The speed and accuracy with which electronic messages and e-mails are delivered is unrivaled by other forms of messaging, such as paper mail, overnight express mail, facsimile, and voice messaging.

Prior to the widespread proliferation of the Internet and Internet-based e-mail, there were many proprietary formats of electronic messaging systems, such as IBM's Lotus Notes system, Novel's DaVinci system, and others.

However, due to global acceptance and adoption of the Internet, the Internet's e-mail protocol has become the most common electronic messaging protocol in use today. The Simple Mail Transfer Protocol ("SMTP") provides for a quick, error-free and robust method for transferring electronic messages from one e-mail server to another. SMTP is primarily based upon two standards proliferated by the Internet Architecture Board ("IAB"), specifically RFC-821 "Simple Mail Transfer Protocol"

and RFC-822 "Standard for the format of ARPA Internet text messages". These standards and protocols are well-known in the art. RFC-821 describes the protocol used for transferring electronic messages from one server to another, and RFC-822 describes a corresponding format for those electronic messages.

5           Turning to Figure 1, the basic arrangement of client browser computer or client e-mail computers and web servers is shown. A client computer (1) may access a web-based e-mail server (5) via any computer network, such as the World Wide Web (3), or an Intranet (6) such as a LAN or WAN. This access may be made through a modem and a dial-up Internet Service Provider ("ISP"), or through a

10   "dedicated" direct connection to the Internet. The client computer (1) is normally equipped with an e-mail composer and reader program, such as Quailcomm's Eudora, Netscape's Messenger, or Microsoft's Outlook programs. These and many other widely available programs are compliant with the SMTP standards, and interoperate with e-mail servers over computer networks such as the World Wide Web.

15           Turning to Figure 2, the arrangement (20) as defined by the RFC's of a sender server (23) and a receiver server (25) using the SMTP protocol is shown. A user (21) may author a SMTP-compliant message and send that message to an e-mail sender server (23). Using a series of SMTP commands (24) which are communicated to a receiver SMTP server (25) via a computer network, the electronic message is

20   transferred from the sender SMTP (23) to the receiver SMTP server (25).

The receiver SMTP (25) server typically stores the received electronic message within its file system (26) for later retrieval by the intended recipient. The

addressing and routing scheme used by e-mail servers to transmit and route electronic messages to each other using of this protocol are well-known within the art, and are also defined in the public RFC documents of the IAB.

- Eventually, the recipient uses his computer (28) to download the messages
- 5 from the receiver server (25), and to read, reply, or forward the messages. His computer (28) is usually equipped with e-mail reading and authoring software, which may include an e-mail address book (27).

The generalized message format of an electronic message is shown in Table 1. An electronic message is typically divided into two portions, a header and a body.

- 10 Within the header are multiple tags or fields which indicate the source and destination of the message and other useful information.

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Table 1: Generalized Electronic Message Format  
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- 15 Received: from source by local\_server; time\_of\_day  
From: senders\_name <senders\_email\_address>  
Reply-to: <senders\_email\_address>  
To: recipients\_name <recipients\_email\_address>  
Subject: text\_of\_the\_subject\_line  
20 Content-type: type\_of\_content\_such\_as\_MIME

Text of the actual message  
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- In the example generalized message format shown in Table 1, there is a “Received” header field, a “From” header field, a “Reply-To” field, and a “To” field.
- 25 These are also followed by a “Subject” field and then finally by the text of the actual message. These fields are generated by the e-mail composer on the originator’s

computer, and they are used by the various e-mail servers within the computer network to route the messages to the correct recipient.

As shown in Table 1, the "Received:" message header field shows information regarding which server received the message and at what time of day it was received by the local server. The "From" field in the message header shows the originator's or the sender's name and address. The "Reply-To" field shows the sender's e-mail address for use in replying to the sender. The "To" field shows the intended recipient's name and/or recipient's e-mail address. And, the "Subject" field shows a text string to be displayed when the e-mail is viewed among other e-mails in a mail box.

Most e-mail composer and reader programs allow messages to be forwarded to second, third, and subsequent recipients. For example, a sender may author an original message and send it to a first recipient. The first recipient may read that message, append comments to it and forward it to a second recipient. Table 2 shows a generalized message format for forwarded electronic messages which uses using a method of forwarding called "inline content".

Table 2: Generalized Forwarded Electronic Message Format  
using Inline Type of Forwarding

Received: from source by local\_server; time\_of\_day

From: first\_recipients\_name <first\_recipients\_email\_address>

Reply-to: <first\_recipients\_email\_address>

To: second\_recipients\_name <second\_recipients\_email\_address>

Subject: FWD:text\_of\_the\_subject\_line\_written\_by\_the\_originator

Content-type: type\_of\_content\_such\_as\_MIME

5 Content-disposition: inline

Text of the message written by the first recipient intended for the second  
recipient

Boundary\_tag

Received: from source by local\_server; time\_of\_day

10 From: originator\_name <originators\_email\_address>

Reply-to: <originators\_email\_address>

To: first\_recipients\_name <first\_recipients\_email\_address>

Subject: FWD:text\_of\_the\_subject\_line\_written\_by\_the\_originator

Content-type: type\_of\_content\_such\_as\_MIME

15 Text of the actual message written by the originator and intended for the first  
recipient

Boundary\_tag

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This forwarded message format resembles the generalized message format of  
20 Table 1, especially in the initial message header, including the "received" field,

"from", "reply-to", "to", and "subject" fields. However, most programs modify the text contained in the "subject" field to include an indication that this is a forwarded message, such as appending the letters "FWD" prior to the actual text of the originator's subject line. Following this message header, the text of the comments

5 authored by the first recipient and intended for the second recipient are given. Then, according to the inline forwarding method, a boundary tag is given which indicates the beginning of the actual forwarded message. Following the first boundary tag, another set of message header fields are shown which are the message header fields from the original message from the original sender of the message. These message

10 fields are then followed by the text of the original message from the originator, and is concluded by a closing boundary tag.

Another method for forwarding an electronic message to another recipient is by "attaching" the original message to the new message. The SMTP protocol allows for files of all types to be "attached" to an electronic message, and as such, one

15 method for forwarding a message is to create a new message to the next recipient, and to attach the old message to this new message.

As shown in Table 3, the general format of a forwarded message as an attachment is seen.

20                      Table 3: Generalized Forwarded Electronic Message Format  
    using Attachment Type of Forwarding

Received: from source by local\_server; time\_of\_day

From: first\_recipients\_name <first\_recipients\_email\_address>

Reply-to: <first\_recipients\_email\_address>

To: second\_recipients\_name <second\_recipients\_email\_address>

5 Subject: FWD:text\_of\_the\_subject\_line\_written\_by\_the\_originator

Content-type: type\_of\_content\_such\_as\_MIME

Content-disposition: inline

Text of the message written by the first recipient intended for the second  
recipient

10 Start-of-attachment-tag

Received: from source by local\_server; time\_of\_day

From: originator\_name <originators\_email\_address>

Reply-to: <originators\_email\_address>

To: first\_recipients\_name <first\_recipients\_email\_address>

15 Subject: FWD:text\_of\_the\_subject\_line\_written\_by\_the\_originator

Content-type: type\_of\_content\_such\_as\_MIME

Text of the actual message written by the originator and intended for  
the first recipient

20 End-of-attachment-tag

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This message begins similar to the message in Table 2 in that it is preceded by a new message header containing multiple header fields, including the "received", "from", "reply-to", "to", "subject" fields. However, in this case following the text of the comments written by the first recipient for the second recipient, there are special tags to indicate that there is attached file rather than the inline copy of the forwarded file. This may be the same type of tag that may be used to attach a data file or other type of file to the electronic message, but in this case the attached file is simply a text file which is actually the original message from the originator.

Thus, if one looks within that attached file, one will see that there is the original set of message header tags which indicate the originator's name, the first recipient's name (or the previous recipient's name) and other useful information regarding the previous message.

A subsequent recipient may choose to forward the message to another recipient, thereby forming a chain-forwarded message which may have the original message forwarded through a combination of methods.

All of these message header fields are used for various functions of the e-mail reader and e-mail composer software. If a user wants to reply to the sender of a message he may simply click or select a "reply" function in response to which the composer will be invoked and will automatically address the message to the address indicated in the "reply-to" field of the message. Also, the user may forward the message quite simply by clicking a "forward" button (or otherwise invoking a forward function), which causes the composer to allow creation of a new messaging

containing or attaching the first message, and giving the user the capability to enter the next recipient's address and any comments he or she wishes to include.

Another useful function of common e-mail composers and readers available in the art today is that of an address book. An address book stores names and e-mail  
5 addresses of other users who are commonly communicate with the user. Most e-mail composers and readers also include automatic functions for adding a message sender's address and information to an address book.

However, with the inline and attachment methods of forwarding electronic messages, addresses for the previous recipient's and the originator of forwarded  
10 messages cannot be easily or automatically added to the address book, other than that of the most immediate previous recipient. Further, they cannot be automatically responded to or forwarded to as they are not currently indicated in the first group of message header fields of the forwarded message.

Thus, a user must resort to attempting to type manually each of the previous  
15 recipient's e-mail addresses, if he knows them. For example, if a message is forwarded five times from an originator, the fifth recipient can automatically reply to the fourth recipient using the available automatic functions of current e-mail composers, however, he cannot easily reply to all four previous recipients and originator without manually retyping the addresses of each of those parties. Further,  
20 he cannot easily add any of these previous recipients and the originator to his address book, except for the fourth recipient.

A third method of forwarding e-mail messages is by "quoting" the actual message into the text of the new message intended for the next recipient. In this method, none of the previous header fields are forwarded to the next recipient. A simple line of text such as "Previous\_recipient wrote:" may be inserted above the  
5 quoted text, and the quoted text may be set apart such as using a character such as ">" or a blue bar in the left margin.

In this case, it is much more difficult for the recipient of a chain-forwarded message to reply to previous recipients because the information regarding the previous recipient's addresses has been completely stripped from the forwarded  
10 message.

Therefore, there is a need in the art for a system and method which can automatically determine the list of chain recipient's of a chain-forwarded electronic message. Further, there exists a need in the art for this system and method to be compatible with existing electronic messaging standards, to be realizable using  
15 existing electronic messaging client computer and server computer apparatus, and to be compatible with the multiple methods of forwarding messages available in the art today.

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The following detailed description, when taken in conjunction with the figures presented herein, provides a complete description of the invention.

FIGURE 1 shows the common arrangement of e-mail servers, client computers, and computer networks.

FIGURE 2 shows the fundamental arrangement of e-mail sender and receiver servers.

FIGURE 3 depicts the basic architecture of e-mail servers and a client  
10 computers.

FIGURE 4 shows the logical process of an enhanced e-mail reader.

FIGURE 5 shows the logical process of an enhanced e-mail composer.

## SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

An enhanced e-mail reader is provided with automatic addressing functions to extract addresses and information regarding previous recipients of chain-forwarded electronic messages and e-mail, and to allow automatic addressing of new electronic messages in reply to all or some of those previous recipients. The enhanced e-mail reader is also capable of automatically adding these previous recipients to an electronic address book. An enhanced e-mail composer provides an enhanced electronic message header which indicates a chain of addresses for previous recipients of a chain-forwarded message, and interoperates with the enhanced e-mail reader.

## DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

The method and system of the invention are preferably realized as software extensions, plug-ins, or applets associated with a standard electronic mail composer and reader program. This enhanced electronic composer and reader program is then  
5 executed by a standard client computer platform such as an IBM personal computer ("PC"), Apple Macintosh or iMAC, or similar computer.

As shown in Figure 3, the preferred embodiment includes a client computer (80) which has a central processing unit (84), disc input and output (85) for communicating for floppy disks, hard drives, and CD ROM's, user IO device  
10 interfaces (86) such as a display, keyboard, and mouse (83), and a network interface card (87) for interfacing to a computer network such as the Internet or an Intranet (81). The preferred embodiment of the client computer includes device drivers and a bios (88), an operating system such as the Microsoft Windows operating system or IBM OS/2 operating system. The computer platform (80) further comprises  
15 non-portable application programs (802) such as the e-mail composer and reader program. The preferred embodiment of the client computer (80) also includes a Java interpreter (89) capable of executing Java applets (801). The e-mail composer and reader such as Netscapes' Messenger program is installed as a non-portable application program (82). The method of the invention may be implemented as  
20 changes within the e-mail composer and reader program or as a plug-in modules such as a Netscape Plug-in. Alternatively, it may be implemented as an applet such as a

Java applet. The methods for extending such program code, developing a browser plug-in, or an applet is well understood in the art.

The logical process (40) of the enhanced e-mail reader is shown in Figure 4. First, a standard electronic message is opened and displayed (41). Then, the text or  
5 code of the message is scanned for attached or inlined forwarded messages, searching for previous recipient message header fields (42), such as the "from" and "reply-to" fields of SMTP e-mail message.

If any of these previous recipient's message header fields are found (43), then a list of the previous recipient's addresses or return addresses is built (44). A user  
10 dialogue is provided to allow for automatic addressing to the entire list or part of the list of previous recipients (47). Further, the user is provided with a function which allows him to add entries from this previous recipients list to his or her address book automatically (48), either by individual entries or by groups of entries.

Then, the rest of the message is processed and handled normally (49). If no  
15 previous recipient message header fields are found when the message is scanned for attached or inlined messages (43), then the e-mail reader scans for any enhanced message header fields which may indicate previous recipients (45). If this special field is found, then the user is provided the functions to allow for automatic addressing to all previous recipients (47), and to add any or all of the previous  
20 recipients to his or her address book (48). If the field is not found, then the remaining message is handled normally (49).

Turning to Figure 5, the logical process of the enhanced e-mail composer is shown. The enhanced e-mail reader previously disclosed is compatible with the two modes of prior art forwarding of electronic messages, namely, the methods of inlining and attaching the forwarded message. However, as a quoted forwarded message does not include any of the message header fields from the previous recipients, the enhanced e-mail reader of Figure 4 may also find a special message header field indicating the chain-recipients of a quoted chain-forwarded message.

In order to provide this feature, the logical process (50) shown in Figure 5 is preferably implemented in an enhanced e-mail composer. When the user invokes the electronic message authoring function of the e-mail composer (51) and indicates that he wants to forward a previously received message, he is provided the normal opportunity to append comments for the next recipient (52). Then, a special field containing the list of previous recipients, which may be generated by scanning the attached or inlined header fields (53) of the original message, is created and added to the new forwarded message.

One embodiment of this special field is shown in Table 4 as the "Sender-Chain" field, which includes a list of previous recipients and/or the originator's name and address. This field may be ignored by other older or non-enhanced versions of e-mail readers, but may be detected and used by enhanced e-mail readers. If no message fields are detected for the previous recipients (54), then the message is sent to the next recipient using a normal unmodified forwarding message.



Table 4: Enhanced Forwarded Electronic Message Format  
using New Header Field for Sender-Chain

5 Received: from source by local\_server; time\_of\_day  
From: first\_recipients\_name <first\_recipients\_email\_address>  
Reply-to: <first\_recipients\_email\_address>  
To: second\_recipients\_name <second\_recipients\_email\_address>  
Subject: FWD:text\_of\_the\_subject\_line\_written\_by\_the\_originator  
10 Content-type: type\_of\_content\_such\_as\_MIME  
Content-disposition: inline/attachment  
Sender-Chain: originator\_name <originators\_email\_address>;  
first\_recipients\_name <first\_recipients\_email\_address>  
Text of the message written by the first recipient intended for the second  
15 recipient  
Boundary tags bracketing inline forwarded message(s) or attachment tags  
bracketing attached message (s)

Alternatively, the "Reply-To field" in the forwarded message header may be  
20 appended to include a list of previous recipients such that the user may simply click or

select "Reply to All" function of the e-mail composer to invoke the full list of previous recipients, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Enhanced Forwarded Electronic Message Format

5 using Multiple Sources in Message

Header "Reply-To" Field for Sender-Chain

Received: from source by local\_server; time\_of\_day

From: first\_recipients\_name <first\_recipients\_email\_address>

10 Reply-to: <first\_recipients\_email\_address>; originator\_name  
<originators\_email\_address>;

To: second\_recipients\_name <second\_recipients\_email\_address>

Subject: FWD:text\_of\_the\_subject\_line\_written\_by\_the\_originator

Content-type: type\_of\_content\_such\_as\_MIME

15 Content-disposition: inline/attachment

Text of the message written by the first recipient intended for the second  
recipient

Boundary tags bracketing inline forwarded message(s) or attachment tags  
bracketing attached message(s)

20 In summary, methods for enhancing standard e-mail and electronic message

readers and composers have been disclosed to allow realization of enhanced e-mail

and electronic message readers and composers which provide automatic addressing and address book management functions for chain-forwarded messages. Certain details of the preferred embodiments have been disclosed, along with alternative approaches to realize the invention. It will be recognized by those skilled in the art

- 5 that many alternatives from the disclosed preferred embodiment, such as the use of alternate programming methodologies or languages, alternate computing platforms, or alternate electronic message and e-mail standards, may be taken within the spirit and scope of the invention which is defined by the following claims.

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